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From Paddy Fields to Pixels: Modern Science, Technology, and the Cultural Reconfiguration of Magh Bihu in Assam

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Abstract

Magh Bihu, the harvest festival of Assam, is far more than a seasonal celebration. It has functioned for centuries as a living interface between a farming community and its land — a site where ecological knowledge, social reciprocity, and cultural memory are annually renewed. Yet the festival Assamese farmers celebrate today bears visible marks of two interlocking pressures: the technological transformation of paddy agriculture since the Green Revolution, and the commercial recontextualization of festival culture by television and digital media. Drawing on primary fieldwork — including structured questionnaires and field observations conducted across agricultural communities in Assam, supplemented by approximately twenty secondary sources including peer-reviewed articles, doctoral dissertations, government reports, and a UGC-sponsored major research project report — this paper traces how these pressures have reconfigured Magh Bihu at the level of material practice and at the level of cultural representation. The central argument is that the pace and the external character of current change have outrun the community's capacity for self-directed cultural adaptation in many parts of Assam, with consequences for ecological knowledge transmission and communal solidarity. The paper draws on ecocriticism (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2004), cultural theory (Appadurai, 1996; Redfield, 1956), and folklore studies (Goswami, 1954; Datta, 1995), and concludes with policy recommendations for a more culturally attentive approach to agricultural modernization and festival governance in Assam. Ethical clearance for this research was granted by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC), North Lakhimpur University.

Keywords: *Magh Bihu, Agrarian Festivals, Modern Technology, Assamese Folk Culture, Cultural Transformation, Ecocriticism*

1. Introduction

Walk through a rural village in the Brahmaputra Valley in January, and Magh Bihu is impossible to miss. The meji bonfires, the thatched bhelagor, the smell of sesame laru and freshly pounded pitha — these belong to one of the most deeply rooted harvest traditions in northeastern India. Agriculture is not incidental to this festival; it is the festival's reason for existence. Roughly 53 percent of Assam's population depends on farming as its primary livelihood, with paddy the dominant crop across the Brahmaputra plain (Government of Assam, 2022). For generations, the material realities of paddy cultivation — the tools, the seasons, the collective labour of sowing and reaping — were encoded directly into every ritual observance of Magh Bihu.

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That encoding has been disrupted. Over the past half-century, two distinct waves of technological change have reshaped the context within which the festival is celebrated. The first wave — agricultural modernization — arrived with the Green Revolution, bringing HYV seeds, chemical inputs, tractor cultivation, and mechanized milling. The traditional dhenki gave way to the rice mill; the collective harvest became a job for a machine; the seasonal calendar of paddy shifted in many parts of the state. The second wave — the spread of commercial television and, more recently, digital social media — has transformed how the festival is seen, staged, and consumed. By 2023, rural mobile phone penetration in Assam stood at approximately 85 percent, and social media use among rural youth has risen sharply (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2023). Both waves have left their mark on Magh Bihu.

The present paper asks, in a focused and theoretically grounded way, what exactly those marks are. The central claim is that the two orders of technological change have reconfigured the festival differently but cumulatively: agricultural technology has loosened the material and ritual connection between the festival and paddy cultivation in many regions, while commercial media have repackaged the festival for audiences and purposes that are largely external to the community that originated it. Neither process amounts to the death of Magh Bihu, but together they have introduced pressures that earlier, slower forms of cultural adaptation could not have anticipated.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the study within the relevant scholarly literature. Section 3 states the objectives and research questions. Section 4 describes the methodology. Section 5 offers a thematic discussion organized around four analytical threads. Section 6 concludes with practical recommendations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The intellectual resources for thinking about technology and cultural change are rich, and a selective review is necessary. Lewis Mumford's argument, developed in Technics and Civilization (1934), that technologies are never merely instruments but always cultural forms — reshaping consciousness, reorganizing social life — remains foundational. For agrarian societies in particular, this insight matters because the tools of production in such societies are not separable from the rituals and social relations they make possible.

Robert Redfield (1956) and M. N. Srinivas (1956) each approached the question of how subordinate cultural traditions respond to dominant ones. Redfield's distinction between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition captures the pressure that literate, urban civilization has always exerted on folk cultures; Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization describes one mode of that response. Both frameworks illuminate something of what is happening in Assam, though neither anticipated the scale or speed of technologically mediated change that Appadurai (1996) later theorized through his concepts of global technoscapes and mediascapes — the flows of machinery, media, and images that increasingly shape local cultural formations from the outside.

The ecocritical tradition adds a dimension that the sociological frameworks alone cannot supply. Lawrence Buell (1995) and Greg Garrard (2004) draw attention to the ways in which cultural forms encode ecological knowledge — knowledge about seasons, soils, water, and the behaviour of living things accumulated over generations of farming. From this perspective, a harvest festival is not merely a social occasion; it is an ecological archive. When its rituals weaken or its agricultural referents shift, something more than custom is lost.

Within Assam studies, Praphulladatta Goswami's seminal work on Bihu songs (1954) remains the most thorough documentation of the connection between the Bihu tradition and agricultural life. Datta (1995) provided essential contextual grounding for Assamese folk traditions, including detailed accounts of the dhenki and the ritual uses of grain. More recent contributions have begun to map the changes. Singha and Singha (2024) examined Kati Bihu among the Koch Rajbongshi community and found the festival's agrarian foundations significantly altered by modernization. Hazarika and Boruah (2024) traced cultural change among the Chutiya tribe of Assam under the twin pressures of modern media and urban migration. Misra and Mishra (2006), working in rural Odisha, documented the erosion of agro-based rituals as mechanized agriculture

displaced traditional practices — findings that hold direct comparative value for Assam. Dutta and Goswami (2021) examined the commercial dimensions of Assamese cultural life, and Rajkhowa's (2019) field-based project report, the most Assam-specific source available, documents the effects of technological change on Magh Bihu rituals through interviews and community surveys across rural Assam.

On the media side, Dayan and Katz's (1992) study of media events showed how the act of televising a traditional event systematically transforms it: the medium's requirements — visual drama, commercial pacing, narrative legibility — take precedence over cultural authenticity. Gogoi et al. (2022, 2024) have examined the gap between indigenous communication systems and modern media technologies in Assam's ethnic communities. Bhalerao et al. (2016) documented analogous processes for traditional media across the northeast more broadly. Taken together, this body of work identifies a convergent set of pressures: shrinking ecological knowledge, accelerating media-driven recontextualization, and the challenge of maintaining cultural continuity under conditions of rapid, externally driven change.

3. Objectives and Research Questions

3.1 Objectives

This paper pursues three primary objectives:

i. To examine how modern agricultural technology has, in many regions of Assam, altered the material practices and ritual dimensions of Magh Bihu.
ii. To critically analyze the role of commercial television and digital media in the recontextualization of Magh Bihu across several communities.
iii. To distinguish between organic cultural evolution and externally driven recontextualization, and to identify the implications of this distinction for cultural policy in Assam.

3.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How has the adoption of modern agricultural technology altered the material conditions and symbolic practices of Magh Bihu in Assam?

RQ2: In what ways has commercial television and digital media reshaped the cultural experience and representation of Magh Bihu across several communities?

RQ3: What are the implications of these changes for Assamese cultural identity, the transmission of ecological knowledge, and folk tradition?

4. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining primary fieldwork with systematic secondary source analysis. The primary data were collected through structured questionnaires and direct field observations conducted across agricultural communities in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam. Respondents comprised farming households, community elders, folk artists, and long-standing village residents with direct experience of traditional Magh Bihu practices and the changes brought about by modern agricultural technology and media. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with standard research ethics protocols. Participants were assured of anonymity and of the voluntary nature of their participation, with the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Ethical clearance for conducting this research and for publishing its findings was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) of North Lakhimpur University, Assam, prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

The secondary data corpus comprises approximately twenty items: peer-reviewed journal articles from agricultural economics, folklore studies, media studies, and cultural anthropology; doctoral dissertations completed at Assamese universities; government agricultural and census reports; archival texts on Assamese folk culture; and the UGC-sponsored major research project report by Dr. Arabinda Rajkhowa (2019), which independently documents traditional Magh Bihu practices and the changes wrought by modern technology through its own programme of field interviews and community surveys across rural Assam. This report provided important comparative and corroborative grounding for the authors' own field findings.

Thematic analysis in the tradition of Braun and Clarke (2006) provides the analytical framework applied to both primary and secondary data. Key themes were identified through systematic reading and coding of all source materials, and organized into four analytical categories: agricultural technology and material change; ritual and symbolic reconfiguration; media, commercialization, and cultural recontextualization; and community identity and ecological knowledge. These categories are interpreted against the theoretical frameworks of ecocriticism (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2004), cultural theory (Appadurai, 1996; Redfield, 1956), and folklore studies (Goswami, 1954; Datta, 1995).

While this mixed-methods design provides both experiential depth and analytical breadth, the authors acknowledge that the scope of fieldwork, concentrated within specific districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, is not exhaustive of Assam's diverse regional agricultural communities. Throughout the discussion, claims are qualified accordingly — 'in many regions,' 'across several communities,' 'in certain contexts' — to reflect this variation. Wider-scale quantitative surveys across multiple districts would be valuable to test and extend the findings reported here.

5. Discussion

5.1 Magh Bihu and Its Agrarian Context

Magh Bihu is not a festival that can be understood apart from the rice field. Its timing — January, in the month of Magh — follows the completion of the winter paddy harvest. Its foods are made from new-crop rice. Its central ritual, the na-khoa or first eating of the new grain, is a direct act of communion with the harvest. Its bonfires consume the stubble of the harvest field. Even its social geography — the gathering of neighbours for collective work, feasting, and games — maps onto the social organization of paddy cultivation, which required coordinated labour, shared tools, and reciprocal exchange. Scholars widely believe Magh Bihu's origins lie in the pre-Aryan agricultural traditions of the indigenous peoples of Assam, though over the centuries it absorbed Vaishnavite religious elements and practices from various ethnic communities across the region (Goswami, 1954; Rajkhowa, 2019).

The material culture of the festival reflects this agrarian grounding in precise ways. The taamal (sickle) and biriya (bamboo shoulder frame) were the tools of the harvest; the dhenki (foot-operated husking pedal) processed the grain; the kuula (winnowing basket) cleaned it; the bhoral (granary) stored it. Each of these objects carried social meaning — the dhenki, in particular, was a site of communal female labour, where women worked in pairs or groups, singing dhenki geet as they husked (Datta, 1995). The gorakhiya sabah, the ritual performed for the welfare of cattle, acknowledged the role of draught animals in cultivation. The lakhimi sabah, addressed to the goddess of prosperity, expressed gratitude for the harvest and hope for the next season. What united these practices was a shared ecological worldview — the conviction that the well-being of people, animals, crops, and land was indivisible. Ecocritical scholarship (Buell, 1995) describes such ritual systems as ecological memory: cultural technologies for transmitting environmental knowledge across generations through practice rather than text.

5.2 Agricultural Technology and the Material Reconfiguration of the Festival

Across many parts of the Brahmaputra Valley, the agricultural transformation of the past fifty years has substantially altered the material infrastructure on which this festival once rested. Five changes deserve particular attention.

The shift in paddy variety and cultivation calendar is the most structurally consequential. Traditional paddy — sali dhan — ripened in Aghon (November-December), making January's Magh Bihu a natural climax to the agricultural year. The spread of HYV varieties, which now cover roughly 60 percent of paddy area in Assam compared to around 20 percent in the early 1980s (Government of Assam, 2022), has pushed harvests into Kaati or even Aheen in many areas. By the time Magh Bihu arrives, the threshing is done, the rice is milled, and the harvest is in the market. Rajkhowa (2019) observes that in many communities the festival has been severed from the agricultural event it was originally designed to mark — not by any deliberate choice but simply as a consequence of changed agronomy.

The mechanization of harvesting has had comparably significant social effects. The collective harvest — in Assamese tradition, a several-day affair involving extended family, neighbours, songs, and communal meals — has been progressively replaced by mechanized reapers that accomplish in hours what used to take days of shared labour. Saikia and Bora (1975) were among the first to document this disruption in Assam. What was lost was not merely efficiency: the collective harvest was the social crucible in which the festival took shape each year.

The dhenki's disappearance from most Assamese homesteads represents perhaps the most culturally legible change. Where it survives — primarily in remoter villages less integrated into market networks — it does so as much as a cultural object as a functional one (Datta, 1995; Rajkhowa, 2019). In the great majority of Assamese households, it has been replaced by the mechanized rice mill, and with it has gone the dhenki geet repertoire, the intergenerational knowledge of grain processing, and the particular form of female communal sociality that the dhenki sustained.

Chemical agriculture has transformed the epistemic relationship between farmers and their land. Traditional paddy cultivation demanded what might be called an ecological literacy — close attention to soil colour and texture, water behaviour, insect activity, plant morphology — accumulated over lifetimes and transmitted across generations. Much of this knowledge found expression in festival ritual, in the timing of offerings, in the choice of which grains to use ceremonially. Market-oriented chemical agriculture has, in many communities, made this literacy less necessary and therefore less cultivated. Productivity, it should be said, has risen: Assam's paddy output grew from approximately 3.9 million tonnes in 1991 to over 5.4 million tonnes by 2020 (Government of Assam, 2022). But the channels through which ecological knowledge and cultural practice were mutually reinforcing have narrowed considerably (Shiva, 1991).

The cumulative effect is visible in the changed status of key rituals. The na-khoa, once a solemn ceremony marking the community's first encounter with the new harvest, is, in many urbanizing households, now a brief formality or has been quietly dropped. Rajkhowa (2019) found the gorakhiya sabah increasingly rare as cattle-based cultivation declines. These are uneven trends — in communities where subsistence farming remains the norm, the ritual calendar of Magh Bihu is considerably more intact — but the direction of change across the region as a whole is clear.

5.3 Media Technology, Commercialization, and Cultural Recontextualization

The story of media and Magh Bihu is, in some ways, the mirror image of the agricultural story. Where agricultural modernization has quietly eroded the festival's material grounding, commercial television has loudly expanded its cultural footprint — while reshaping, in the process, what the festival looks like and what it means.

The proliferation of Assamese-language television channels from the 1990s onwards turned Magh Bihu into a major programming event. In some cases, as Rajkhowa (2019) reports, coverage begins more than a month before the festival day, generating a media-produced anticipation that owes nothing to the agricultural cycle and everything to broadcasters' advertising calendars. The festival's temporality — always rooted, in the traditional context, in the actual completion of the harvest — has been replaced by a media-generated 'festive season' whose duration is set by commercial rather than agrarian logic. Dayan and Katz (1992) showed that

this is not peculiar to Assam: whenever a traditional event is broadcast by electronic media, the medium's requirements systematically reshape the event, prioritizing spectacle over meaning.

The effects on the physical forms of the festival are visible and, in some communities, startling. The bhelagor and the meji, traditionally built through collective community labour using locally available materials and following conventions developed over generations, have in some areas become competitive constructions designed for television. Rajkhowa (2019) documents cases of bhelagors constructed as replicas of the Taj Mahal and the historic Ranghar, elaborately lit with electric displays. Whether these spectacles attract admiration or unease — and both responses are found among Assamese communities — they represent a clear departure from a structure whose symbolic significance was inseparable from the forest, the harvest field, and the labour of the community that built it.

Festival foods have followed a similar trajectory. Pithas, laru, and jolpan — rice-based preparations whose home production once structured the weeks before Magh Bihu, involving several generations of women, transmitting culinary knowledge, and generating shared labour — are now widely available as commercial products, standardized for shelf life and supermarket presentation rather than ritual significance or household tradition. Rajkhowa (2019) and Dutta and Goswami (2021) both note the significant decline in home preparation, particularly in peri-urban households.

Social media has added yet another layer. Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have created powerful incentives to perform festival practices for an audience beyond the community — the diaspora, tourists, the algorithmically assembled public — in ways that often flatten and simplify what is being performed. Gogoi et al. (2024) documented the widening gap between indigenous communication practices and modern media cultures in Assam's ethnic communities; young people increasingly encounter their own traditions as digital content. The global reach of social media has unquestionably kept Magh Bihu visible for Assamese communities worldwide, and that is genuinely valuable. But visibility and vitality are not the same thing (Kotoky & Bandopadhyay, n.d.; Bhalerao et al., 2016).

5.4 Implications for Community Identity and Ecological Knowledge

The distinction between organic cultural evolution and externally driven recontextualization is not merely academic; it is the analytical key to understanding what is actually happening to Magh Bihu.

Magh Bihu has always changed. The Vaishnavite elements incorporated over several centuries, the adoption of new tools as they became available, the cross-ethnic borrowings that have enriched the festival's repertoire — all of these represent a community absorbing new influences and making them its own, on its own terms, at a pace it could manage. This kind of evolution is the mark of a living tradition, not its corruption. The changes associated with Green Revolution agriculture and commercial television are different in character. They did not arise from within the community; they were driven by external forces — state agricultural policy, global seed markets, broadcast industry economics, platform algorithms — that had their own logics and priorities, quite independent of Magh Bihu's cultural continuity.

The consequences of this difference show up most clearly in what has happened to communal solidarity and ecological knowledge transmission. Misra and Mishra (2006) found in rural Odisha that the displacement of traditional agricultural practices did not merely change what farmers did; it eroded the ritual and folk-song traditions that had served as the primary vehicles for community cohesion and ecological knowledge across generations. The parallel in Assam is direct. The decline of collective harvesting, of communal dhenki operation, of shared pitha preparation — these are not merely the loss of picturesque customs; they are the loss of occasions through which knowledge, relationships, and cultural identity were reproduced year after year. Younger generations growing up without these practices are growing up with a significantly reduced exposure to the ecological and agricultural knowledge their grandparents carried as a matter of course (Singha & Singha, 2024; Hazarika & Boruah, 2024).

Buell (1995) describes this as ecological amnesia — the forgetting, at the community level, of knowledge about land, seasons, and human-environment relationships accumulated over centuries. In Assam's

case, this knowledge is not only historically significant; it is practically relevant to some of the most pressing challenges the region faces, including climate variability, flooding, soil degradation, and the long-term sustainability of paddy agriculture in the Brahmaputra Valley. The loss of the communities that once held this knowledge in living practice is therefore not only a cultural matter.

6. Conclusion

Three conclusions emerge from this study, each answering one of the research questions posed at the outset.

The answer to RQ1 is that agricultural modernization has substantially reconfigured the material basis of Magh Bihu in many parts of Assam. The tools, the collective labour, the seasonal rhythms, and the ecological literacy that once gave the festival's rituals their specific meaning have been progressively displaced. The displacement is most advanced in peri-urban and market-connected communities where HYV adoption and cattle-free farming are most complete; in many remote rural communities, stronger continuities survive. But the overall direction of change across the region is toward a festival whose agricultural referents are increasingly historical rather than present.

The answer to RQ2 is that commercial television and digital social media have introduced a form of cultural recontextualization that is qualitatively different from anything earlier forms of external influence produced. The festival has been temporally extended beyond its agrarian basis, aesthetically reshaped by competitive spectacle, and increasingly mediated for audiences — global diaspora, tourists, algorithm-assembled publics — who are external to the communities that originated it. This shift is commercially driven; it serves broadcasters and platforms, not the farmers who built the bhelagor.

The answer to RQ3 is that these changes, taken together, have placed genuine pressure on the systems through which communal solidarity, intergenerational knowledge, and ecological consciousness were reproduced in Assamese agrarian communities. The crucial analytical point — worth restating clearly — is not that Magh Bihu is 'dying' or that change is inherently problematic, but that the pace and external character of current change have outrun the community's capacity for self-directed cultural adaptation in many contexts.

What would a policy response look like? Cultural documentation efforts need to go beyond recording performances — songs, dances, recipes — to capture the agricultural and ecological knowledge embedded in the festival: the tools, the crop varieties, the seasonal practices, the communal labour arrangements. Regional television channels and digital media producers have an opportunity, and arguably a responsibility, to develop coverage practices that do not reduce the festival to spectacle. Agricultural development programmes would benefit from cultural impact assessments — systematic attention to how the adoption of new technologies affects the festival practices and ecological knowledge of specific communities, not as an afterthought but as part of the design process. Schools and universities have a role to play in creating space for the transmission of traditional agricultural and ecological knowledge to younger generations who encounter that knowledge, if at all, primarily through screens.

Future research should move from the secondary to the primary. District-level surveys comparing communities at different stages of agricultural modernization would allow the claims made here to be tested and refined with quantitative grounding this study cannot supply. Ethnographic fieldwork — attending to how women, youth, and local cultural organizations are actually negotiating these tensions — would fill in the human texture that aggregate data necessarily flattens. The agrarian festivals of Assam are a heritage of genuine scholarly and practical significance, and they deserve sustained, serious, interdisciplinary attention.

Conceptual Framework (Figure 1)

Figure 1 synthesizes the analytical framework of this study by mapping the interconnections between agricultural transformation, media recontextualization, and their implications for ritual practice, community identity, and ecological knowledge. The map is organized around five thematic clusters: the agrarian context from which the festival historically derived its meaning; the processes of agricultural modernization that have altered its material basis in many regions; the media and technological forces that have commercially

recontextualized it; the resulting social and cultural reconfiguration of communal life; and the policy and research directions that the study findings point toward. Together, these clusters constitute the two-level argument advanced in this paper — that technological change has reconfigured Magh Bihu both at the level of agricultural practice and at the level of cultural representation.

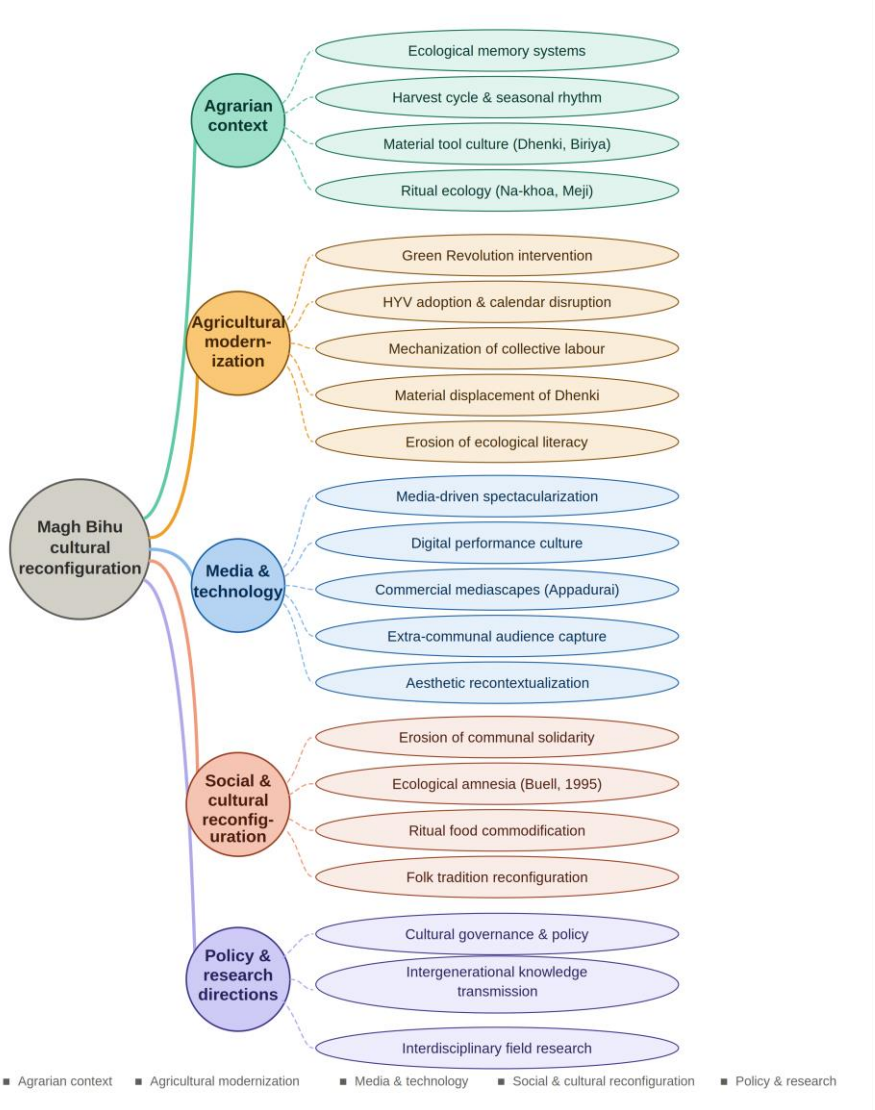

Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the multi-dimensional reconfiguration of Magh Bihu under the influence of agricultural and media technologies

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Ethics Statement

This study involved primary data collection through structured questionnaires and field observations with human participants in agricultural communities in Assam. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from each participant in accordance with standard research ethics protocols. Participants were assured of anonymity, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Ethical clearance for conducting this research and for publishing its findings was granted by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) of North Lakhimpur University, Assam, prior

to the commencement of fieldwork. No animal subjects were involved at any stage. The study was conducted in full accordance with the ethical guidelines of Praxis International Journal of Social Science and Literature and the standard principles of ethical research involving human participants.

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Author Contributions

Munmi Dutta: Conceptualization, field investigation, data collection, structured questionnaire design, formal analysis, data curation, writing – original draft preparation, and writing – review and editing. Dr. Dhiraj Patar: Conceptualization, field coordination, methodology design, supervision, validation, writing – review and editing, and project administration. Both authors participated in the fieldwork and have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the design, conduct, or reporting of this study.

Data Availability Statement

This study draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data — comprising field questionnaire responses and observation notes collected from agricultural communities in Assam — are not publicly deposited due to commitments to participant confidentiality; however, de-identified and aggregated data may be made available to qualified researchers upon reasonable written request to the corresponding author (Email: munmi.dutta@nlu.ac.in; Tel.: +91-94351-86092). All secondary sources are fully cited in the References section and are accessible through their respective publishers or databases.

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